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THE ATHLETIC CONTEST AS A "TRAGIC" FORM OF ART

by

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Athletic contests have become increasingly significant as forms of human expression. Performer and spectator alike understand that athletic contests involve drama. Dramatic tension is created when athletes are able to overcome the limitations placed on freedom through superlative action. Many kinds of controls and restraints are placed on the competitions of various orders, and winners are determined by their ability to use movement forms with a high degree of excellence within those given confines. Unfortunately, at least from an aesthetic appreciation posture, excellence in athletics has been equated with quantitative measures. Winning has become the necessary condition for achieving excellence. The fetish for the scoreboard does not accurately define the conditions of the contest, or man as athlete engaged in athletic phenomena. This constraint to victory would be a restriction on the freedom of the aesthetician to perceive other forms of beauty and excellence in athletics.

One may ask, how many wins are necessary to prove excellence? Apparently, necessary quantitative grounds for excellence exist when one is able to hold a portentous forefinger aloft and proclaim "number one" status. In the qualitative realm of aesthetics, such is not the case. The process becomes more important than outcome, or product.

Art involves a transformation. Art, as process, is a becoming, a changing of reality, and not an achieved state. Reality is perceived in a new perspective by the artist, a perspective which is aesthetically significant. It is true that we can be guided by paradigm cases in art. Even then, what is beautiful, like who is best, always remains an "open question." There are always borderline cases to be considered and necessary conditions are useful, if not sufficient, in drawing attention to processes which may be candidates for inclusion in the aesthetic domain.

Aristotle set forth necessary conditions for tragedy in his *Poetics*. His form of tragedy is of interest to those concerned with beauty in athletics because Aristotle viewed process as greater in philosophic import than the emphasis on outcome. Singular and factual historical events relate what "has been." The concern with process is a concern for what "can be."¹

This paper shall explore some possibilities from Aristotle's model for the athletic contest. New methods of conceiving athletics are needed if the phenomenon is to be fully understood. The win-lose approach is not the only viable method of judging excellence in athletics. New perspectives have a way of jarring us out of some of our conformity. Tragedy affords us another kind of meaning for the athletic contest, which we do not normally supply to it.

All art affects an allusion of facility. Athletic art is a process of doing, of craftsmanship which becomes artistic as it becomes "loving,"² and as it becomes an "endeavor after perfection in execution."³ Athletic competition qualifies as

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art as it is able to raise the limits of insight and expectancy and create ever new levels of human achievement. Athletes enter a contest with the intent of playing well, and thereby, they may mutually produce an aesthetic contest. The athletic contest also functions culturally. Like the drama, it functions as a mechanism for the celebration and enforcement of traditions of race and group. It instructs people by commemorating the glories of the past and by strengthening communal pride.⁴

The struggle and conflict of athletics is agnostic. We normally do not associate the pain and suffering of competition with beauty. The dramatic tragedy is unique in this respect. Even painful experience, both physical and mental, can be perceived as beautiful. When the distasteful can be perceived as a means for further developing and cultivating an experience, it may be viewed as aesthetic and enjoyable.⁵

Pleasurable, or painful, or both, athletic sport has the power to excite us. To generate this indispensable excitement something must be at stake and the odds concerning outcome must be doubtful. Lopsided athletic contests are as unexciting and aesthetically unpleasant as canvases that provide the "artist" with numbers and lines to follow in painting a picture. The result is known prior to the experience. Sure things do not arouse us aesthetically or emotionally. All athletic contests, like all painting, are not aesthetically pleasing.

To discover the aesthetic in athletics is to be concerned with the action and movement of the medium, since athletics is necessarily process oriented. Overemphasis on the product of athletics especially a solitary, fixed, final structure like winning—obscures the aesthetic qualities. Too often an appreciation of the aesthetic character of an athletic contest escapes player and spectator alike.⁶ With the player the problem may be attributable to an inability to achieve the "psychological distance" necessary to evaluate objectively. Some athletes have, however, claimed the ability to concentrate on the exigencies of the contest while entertaining an awareness of the aesthetic properties of the dimension.

Lack of artistic appreciation for the athletic contest may also be attributed to lack of knowledge of aesthetic qualities. Both player and spectator must possess some understanding of aesthetic qualities to judge a contest's artistic form. Another difficulty is that aesthetic perception is also partly an affair of readiness on the part of motor equipment.⁷ A movement is appreciated to the extent that it is understood. The athlete must train and perfect his skills until he is able to cope with a variety of strategic situations successfully on the spur of the moment. Athletic contests provide him with the opportunity to improvise and transform his movement talents. Despite what some coaches may believe, as witnessed by their so-called "bibles," the highly electric events of athletics often have not been previously experienced by the athlete in quite the same contest. There is an element of newness, even of uniqueness, associated with the exciting situations in a contest. Perhaps it is the ability to cope with the novel, immediately and skillfully, which provides us with an aesthetic quality in the process of the athletic contest.

Only the skilled, experienced spectator, recognizes the extreme difficulty and fully appreciates the artistry of another's performance. As a competent observer,

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he can follow a performance sympathetically, if not overtly, through his own body. He has prior movement experience of a similar nature. The knowledge which comes from motor preparation plays a prominent role in aesthetic appreciation in any particular art form.⁸ Yet even with this sort of knowledge, aesthetic qualities may escape notice because of engrossment in the immediacy of events. However, while the aesthetics of the movement dimension are most readily available in the action itself, they are also rationally accessible to player and spectator alike *ex post facto*.

The drama is an art form developed with spectators in mind. The audiences at athletic contests behave similarly to those at dramatic stage productions; there is applause for performers who are skillful as well as overt manifestations of disapproval for poor performances. We speak of "players" in both athletics and drama. The attitudes and experiences surrounding stage and arena are also similar in that we take pleasure and delight in exciting performances which deliver an organized sequence of action executed with skill. If attendance at contests is any indication, athletics appear to have become the modern theater.

One of the most powerful members of the dramatic genre is the tragedy. The tragedy symbolizes man's struggle with the inequities and paradoxes of life. In tragedy, man is featured in an attempt to overcome hostile forces to which he inevitably must succumb. The display of courage in the face of adversity is prized because it reflects something beautiful about man—the spirit with which he enters marvelous combat with an overwhelming and unpredictable world. The tragic athlete's call to the contest may be likened to Unamuno's call "to live, seeing that we all have to die; to live, because life is an end in itself."⁹ It is the tragic sense, the profoundest sense of our common humanity, which provides us with a positive inspiration.¹⁰

The tragedy applauds the same fighting spirit that is found in the athletic contest. It commends the insuperable fortitude and gallantry of the underdog who fails to recognize that he is the underdog, and who fails to relent even when controlled by athletic powers greater than his own. It is this conflict between the inevitable power of "necessity," and the reaction to it by conscious effort which is dramatic.

Dramatic tragedy and athletics have more in common than conflict resolution. In ancient Greece the theater and the stadium were often located adjacently. The Greek word "theatron" literally means "a place for viewing a spectacle."¹¹ The historical antecedent of the tragedy was a competitive movement form in quest of a prize at the ancient Greek festival rites. Aristotle informs us that the tragedy originally was an improvisation by the leaders of the dithyramb.¹² A literal interpretation of dithyramb renders it as a leaping, inspired dance, a dance performed to implore the gods to come to Athens and dance flower crowned.¹³ The flower crown is interesting because it was also an award given to athletes at athletic festivals. The frenzied dancing of the dithyramb evolved into a kind of dramatic competition which was composed and enacted by performers called "tragedians." The tragedians, or poets, competed for a prize which was awarded for the best performance. The original prize for the poet who best illustrated tragedy was a goat. This may explain why the word

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tragedy has often been interpreted to mean "goat song."¹⁴ Even today, the tragic athlete who commits the fatal "faux pas" during the course of the contest, is referred to as the "goat!" It is in the origin of tragedy as dance, a strenuous movement form, and in the competition for a prize, that tragedy relates most vividly to athletics. During the tragedies enacted at the Feast of Dionysus, "the whole public understood all the allusions and reacted to the subtleties of style and expression, sharing the tension of the contest like a crowd at a football match."¹⁵

Changes in the early form of Grecian tragedy led to a more stabilized form which Aristotle described with an air of certainty. The medium as described by Aristotle, is designed primarily to have an emotional impact on the audience, a reaction resulting from critical action. Aristotle's most concise definition reads as follows:

Tragedy, then, is the imitation of a good action, which is complete and of a certain length, by means of language made pleasing for each part separately; it relies in its various elements not on narrative but on acting; through pity and fear it achieves the purgation of such emotions.¹⁶

This passage describes six formal elements which provide the structure of tragedy as an art form. These six are: (1) plot (mythos); (2) character (ethe); (3) thought (dianoia); (4) diction (lexis); (5) music (melopoia); and (6) spectacle (opsis).

Of the six elements, plot is by far the most important. Four kinds of plot were identified by Aristotle, the first three of which he rejected as unsuitable for tragedy. The primacy of plot is essential, and the one favored by Aristotle finds a "common man," that is, one who is neither good nor bad in the Aristotelian sense, of extremes falling from a state of happiness to misery, unhappiness, and perhaps even death. The "common man" is one who is not outstandingly endowed with "virtue." We can readily identify with the actions of this plot for the hero is to be one much like ourselves.

In the plot there is a "mimesis" of action. "Mimesis is commonly interpreted as 'imitation.'" Kaufmann suggests that "representation" may be a better meaning of "mimesis."¹⁷ It is a better word for the context of athletics.

The plot has a beginning, middle, and end, and the action is of sufficient length and quality to give it magnitude and dimension, and to illustrate a human predicament.

The language of plot is not seriously considered at any length by Aristotle. He stresses action rather than narrative. "Tragedy, then, is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery."¹⁸ The major qualification for language is that it be made pleasing.

The plot progresses through an arrangement of events which display tragic consequences that result from the hero's "hamartia." "Hamartia" has proven equally difficult to translate to English. It has been translated as: a moral weakness; a mistake; a flaw in character; and, as an error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances. Interpretation is hindered by the fact

that there are often no exact equivalent English words for many Greek words. However, all interpretations of "hamartia" seem to point to a failing of one kind or another.¹⁹ It is because of some memorable and seemingly unavoidable failing that tragic man falls into unhappiness. His "mistake" may occur at any point in the plot.²⁰ When it occurs at the end of the plot, the cathartic effect is stronger.

Catharsis is the final element that must be considered by the poet in his plot. The true test of any tragic plot is whether it has the power to evoke the emotions "eleos" and "phobos," pity and fear. The drama serves the cathartic function of purging the spectator of these emotions. The aesthetic interest lies in a sobering of the spectator which brings him to an aesthetic realization of the frailty of human existence.

The second element of tragedy is character. Character is that in the drama which reveals the purpose of the agents and the intentionality of the action.²¹ Characterization is successful when the "players" are capable of depicting the purpose of the drama accurately during a series of events.

Thought, the third element of tragedy, is the capacity to express what is involved or suitable to the situation.²² Thought is reflected in language. It is the outward manifestation of what the "player" believes is the correct response. Thought is revealed in all that is said in proving or disproving some particular point.²³

Diction is the use of language to express the thoughts of the characters accurately and precisely.²⁴

Melody, of course, refers to music. Aristotle held music to be the most "pleasurable accessory" of the tragedy.

The final element of the tragedy is the spectacle. It involves the actual staging or public performance of the tragedy. Aristotle felt it to be the least important of the six attributes of dramatic tragedy. It depended on the services of those other than the poet, like the costumer and the ticket seller, and had little to do with the formal structure of the action in the drama.

There is no doubt that athletic contests, like other human endeavors, provide drama. No one would question whether Bannister's effort, which produced the first sub-four minute mile, was dramatic. Drama seems to pervade every contest in which there is doubt about the outcome. The question is, when does the drama of athletics reach tragic proportions? Was Bannister's effort tragic because he knew his record was not to receive tenure, because records are transient rather than eternal occurrences? When is the athletic contest tragic in the aesthetic sense?

In the athletic contest, two aspire to what only one may possess. The athlete's dedication to training and excellence is motivated by the urge to win. Athletes feel a kind of compulsion to train, practice, and compete to the limits of their ability. They seek perfection through practice. They abhor losing—the symbolic death of the contest. It is this sort of compelling force which grips the mind of the tragic hero in the staged drama as well. It is the will to overcome that provides the tragic impetus.

These qualities endear the athlete to all men. As a man of action the athlete

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has an universal appeal. His actions become "good actions" as he is able to perform well.

Good action is more than excellence of performance. There is an emotional expectancy. The aura of the "big game" is one of anticipation, of excitement. It is a serious encounter in which the stakes are high; the Super Bowl is a current example. But even Super Bowls can fail to reach tragic proportions. "Laughs" just don't excite us. There must be a portrayal of will, a comeback, a persistence where lesser men would relinquish; tragedy must be an insistence in the face of adversity. The tragic athlete continues to assert his freedom in an attempt to disturb the impending forces of necessity. Such action is good action in the tragic sense.

The primacy of interest in the plot of the tragedy does not lie in defeat; attention is directed to the circumstances surrounding the precipitating the contest, the qualities which reflect a particular contest as an example of man's plight in an uncertain world.

The mimetic feature of athletic tragedy lies partially in its portrayal of life in microcosm. The action of the arena both represents and presents the man of action because the action is real. The stage must rely on imitation; athletics present life first hand and thereby increase the drama.

Aside from presenting an image of life, the mimetic feature of tragedy can take another form more directly related to the spectator. Lenk states:

the seriousness of sport is stressed by the presence of spectators. The spectator has a "connection" with the athlete, a "participation," which might be understood as a sort of imitation of the movements he makes.²⁵

Along the same line Maheu relates:

In the theatre the audience involves itself in the drama being enacted before it, thus becoming, after a fashion, actor as well as spectator, and similarly in the stadium, an intense empathy develops between spectators and performers.²⁶

Watching spectators provides us with insight to a second order of "mimesis." They seem to be trying to enter the bodies of the athletes they watch. They lean, twist, rise, wriggle and squirm. The mimetic feature of tragedy transfers from the arena to the stands both in terms of physical manifestations and mental gymnastics. The arm chair quarterback plays a game of wits. He anticipates action and attempts strategic decisions as if he were coaching or actually playing. He parades his expertise by announcing proper actions in advance of actual occurrences. When his pronouncements find consonance with real events, the spectator is fulfilled and delighted with the drama. The action becomes, in a sense, imitative of his forecasts and representative of his will.

Elias and Dunning, discussing the mimetic effect of events, point out that the strict interpretation of "mimesis" as "imitation" is not wholly justified. "Mimesis," they assert, "refers to all kinds of artistic forms in their relation to

'reality,' whether they were representational in character or not."²⁷ The implication is that all art forms, athletics included, are in some sense imitative of other art forms.

Athletic contests, like dramatic tragedy, are divided into time periods of varying length. Periods, quarters, halves, and innings are the counterpart of the "acts" of drama. The action of the athletic tragedy, like the action of the staged tragedy, is enhanced when the plot includes what Aristotle calls *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*, or recognition and reversal.

Recognition involves what a player has done, or what he has become.²⁸ The athlete suffers from an identity crisis. He seeks to know or recognize himself as an athlete through competition with other athletes. When his competitive aspirations and achievements are in harmony, he is fulfilled. Even in defeat fulfillment is potentially available. To the athlete, the contest is that which permits him to approach the truth of his being as an athlete. The aesthetician, however, sees the actions and their intent as indicative of the actions of man.²⁹ The dilemma of the athlete is that recognition of personal excellence in terms of product is not always forthcoming; it is attainable only for a few athletes. The quantitative restrictions which the athlete accepts have absolute limiting powers. Each athlete can, it is true, "measure" himself objectively under these conditions. Often, he is brought quickly to an awareness of self that he finds undesirable. The realization that one is not a great athlete, the best, "Number one," can be traumatic for those who come close but fail. In this case, recognition is becoming abruptly aware that one is another person. The contest, in this instance, is a vital aspect of existence which opens the self to the mystery of one's being as an athlete.³⁰

Recognition also can involve the discovery that an action through to be proper is indeed "tragic." This kind of "recognition" is reminiscent of Roy Riegels, the 1929 Rose Bowl football player who ran the wrong way with a fumble. His all-American teammate, Bennie Lom, stopped him just short of the goal line. This action resulted in the safety which eventually decided the game. Tragic? One could claim that this situation illustrates comedy, not tragedy.

There are two senses of tragedy in the contest; one is characterized by the contest as a whole. It has its own intentionality. The second sense involves a factor inside the contest. The defeat of one party to the contest transforms the victor into an anti-hero. The victor illustrates the comedy of the human situation by succeeding in circumstances his worthy opponent, a fellow man, cannot overcome. One is defeated by the very structure of man's existence in the world, while the other is victorious. It seems paradoxical. The tragic contest illustrates the classical comic and tragic elements, each standing in intentional relationship to the other.

The difference between tragedy and comedy is not in essence one of subject matter, but depends upon our point of view. The same action, involving the same people, can be represented as tragic or comic.³¹

Peripeteia, or reversal, is a sudden flip flop of advantage during the contest.

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John Brodie's pass into the arms of a surprised Dallas Cowboy reversed the tenor of the game. It was a crucial turning point. Advantage seemed to shift almost completely to Dallas when previously the precarious nature of the game was evident.

Aesthetically speaking, the most tragic end of an athletic contest occurs when the outcome is decided on the final play or in the last few seconds, with both recognition and reversal occurring simultaneously. A team on the way to an apparent victory is suddenly defeated. A crazy turn of events, some unforeseen and apparently unpreventable incident, a long shot gamble, succeeds. The end comes just as the final seconds tick away.

There is no opportunity to recoup, no choice in the matter—freedom seems lost—there is no possibility of retaliation, only resignation and the unhappiness that accompanies the loser stricken by tragic recognition and reversal. Excitement in these closing moments peaks as the scoreboard clock initiates furious bits of action aimed at the recovery of a lost image. The tragic athlete, demanding perfection of himself, seeks the fulfillment of his capacities even in the face of impending failure. Athletic tragedy inevitably trembles on a thin line between victory and defeat. Examples of this nature are legion in the annals of sport. In 1966, Milt Plum tossed a desperation 60 yard pass to Amos Marsh in the last 25 seconds to defeat Minnesota. The play so upset Van Brocklin that he retired the next day. He could not believe what he had seen. The unreality of the event provided it with the quality of power. It changed an existent situation into its opposite. The sudden death battle between Baltimore and New York, the first in professional football, seemed tragic, saddening, even pitiful. One of those great teams had to lose, yet in defeat was made beautiful by the nature of the action leading to defeat.

Fear always accompanies athletes in these situations. The excellence of athletes permits them to rise to the occasion, knowing that the future may hold the promise of disaster as well as the fulfillment of dreams. We can truly sympathize with classic efforts of athletic excellence that end in tragedy. They parallel the difficult episodes of life. The beauty resides in the effort, not the result. We only need be reminded of the performance of Dornado Pietri, an Italian entry in the Olympic marathon of 1908. The amazing Pietri entered the stadium with an enormous lead on the field, needing only to negotiate the last 385 yards to win. His 26 mile effort had left him in an obvious state of extreme physical fatigue. On rubbery, wobbly legs, he somehow agonizingly circled the track while swerving across several lanes as if drunk. The crowd cheered lustily for him to continue, to fight off the fatigue, to win. His final collapse came near the finish line as the eventual winner, an American runner named John Hayes was just entering the stadium. Pietri in defeat had given the spectators more than 300 yards of raw human courage—the kind of effort that even in defeat exemplifies the spirit of man at his best.

But reversal need not occur at the end. The kind of event referred to as a "pivotal point," or a "turning point," usually carries the kind of impact that is referred to by reversal. These events carry the premonition of impending defeat; While the contest must yet run its course, one senses that the outcome has been

decided.

Tragedy does not preclude the possibility of a happy end.³² This is necessarily the case in athletics for while defeat brings unhappiness, victory brings joy to the same contest. Aesthetically, both winner and loser are appreciated for having "played the tragedy," so to speak. In the humanistic sense, the winner is tragic, for he denies the "other" what both hold supreme; that is, victory in the contest, and victory for the athlete is synonymous with fulfillment. The "other" athlete, the loser, is not "another," but rather, he is the universal athlete. As such he is a participant in the same order of consciousness as are the victors. Both "achieve" and fail to "achieve."

"Harmartia" is a crucial part of the plot in a tragedy. You will recall that "hamartia" is a tragic failing. It is the necessary mistake, or flaw, which eventuates defeat. It may be a physical shortcoming, an inability to perform a certain skill at a sufficient level to avoid defeat. The quarterback looks for a weakness of this nature in the defense which he can attack and exploit; wishing to hasten the fall, he initiates action aimed at a formation which is not appropriate—a sort of mental failing by the defensive coordinator. Scouting reports are aimed at uncovering such weaknesses, both mental and physical. Such information may not be used until the most opportune moment—the instant when its use will inflict the most telling damage to the opponent.

The "failing," the fateful flaw, does not always occur on the defensive side. To illustrate, at the crucial moment, with 31 seconds left to play, Jan Stenerud was called upon to kick a 31 yard field goal against Miami in the waning seconds of a recent game. He had not missed from that distance all season, but this one, the most important goal of his career, was not to be. His identity as the premier kicker in the NFL was besmirched. Kansas City lost in the longest football contest in history.

Mental and emotional failings may take the form of "blowing one's cool," or losing concentration. Often, the one upmanship strategy is employed in a calculated effort to cause a failing. Athletes with low "boiling" points are goaded in an attempt to get them ejected from a game, at least to rattle them. Coaches will call for a "time out" to allow a poor free throw shooter time to think about missing a crucial attempt. Another example of "hamartia" in the tragic athletic contest is the athlete or team that habitually practices with exceptional skill, but always seems to deliver a manque performance in the contest itself. A defect is exposed which Weiss calls a defect in character.³³ Just as in the drama, "hamartia" takes many forms in the athletic contest.

The final concept that must be given attention to complete the discussion of plot is "catharsis." Catharsis is concerned with reactions of spectators. The curative effect Aristotle attributed to tragedy is a product of the release of pleasurable excitement at events of a serious and critical nature. The knowledgeable spectator is aware of the seriousness of athletics. "No one at any time likes to lose, but the athlete performing before an audience is forced to 'win' instead of playing for 'play's sake.' Winning becomes the primary motivation."³⁴ Losing is a kind of evil to be avoided. We are sympathetic for those athletes who seem to deserve a more just reward than fate has in store for them.

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The plot with recognition and reversal near the end causes cathartic upsurges of pleasurable excitement and emotional release. The psyche is liberated of tensions that originated beyond the perimeters of the contest. The contest provides for a maintenance of mental tonus.³⁵

The tragic plot spins out a web of episodes complicating the recognition process. Reversals increase the tensions. With winning as the "raison d'être" of the contest, any hint of defeat elicits fear. It is this kind of dramatic plot which evokes emotional upheaval and produces the cathartic effect.³⁶

Like culture and the arts in general, sport exteriorizes those feelings and emotions in the player and, by empathy, in the spectator, thereby assuming the function of "catharsis," of purification.³⁷

The aesthete is wary of the trend in athletics of viewing an opponent as an enemy to be literally destroyed. Such a plot does not evoke the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle plainly believed that when enemy crushes enemy as in war, pity and fear were not forthcoming. We justify the conquering of an enemy as a deserved fate. The warlike model of athletics is reminiscent of the Roman gladiatorial games in which the loser often received "thumbs down" and paid with his life. There is no longer a "mimesis" of pleasurable action in such events, only the stark reality of depravity and terror.

The "character" of the tragic contest is conveyed through plot, through adversaries vying with a necessity which decrees that one side shall win, and one lose. When the players are excellent performers, as actors are excellent performers, they bring greatness to their roles. Good athletes give us good action in the plot. They characterize the purposiveness and seriousness of the plot. But what of the tie? What of that contest that provides good action, elicits the emotions of pity and fear, and ends in a draw? Can it be considered tragic?

At the festivals of ancient Greece a drawn contest was called "no contest," or a "sacred contest." In a "sacred contest" the prize for victory was offered to the gods.³⁸ In crucial contests, those of great magnitude, the rules are amended to allow a decision. Races ending in a tie were repeated until a decision was reached. One runner defeated his opponent in the stade race (200 yards) on the fourth repeat.³⁹

A tie is not tragic. Such contests cannot qualify aesthetically. Crisis passes without a solution to dilemma; a temporal end is achieved; a definitive aesthetic end is not! A draw does not cause the intense sort of emotional suffering that accompanies defeat; it doesn't arouse that pleasurable catharsis. The standard line in athletics is that a tie is "like kissing your sister." The true character of an athletic contest is that winner and loser are inexorably sought.

Language portrays the thinking of the players as well as the character of the plot. For the aesthete the language or medium of the athlete is bodily movement. These movements represent the mind of the athlete. The athlete's movement has a visual impact on spectators in the way that an actor's language has mental impact on the audience. The athlete's movements indicate his thoughts. Movement symbolizes his existence and possesses meaning for him as an avenue

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to knowledge about self in the athletic medium.⁴⁰ Movement reflects not only the thoughts of athletes, but of coaches as well. Like a choreographer, his thoughts can be read in the strategies released through movements. The meaning of underlying thought accompanying movement is released and understood when the execution of movements is skillful. Execution is the diction of the athlete's language.

The athletic contest often has a circus atmosphere. The "big game" has its pre-game, half time, and post game music, entertainment, appetizers, color, pageantry, costuming, exhibitions and displays. These things are not essential to the tragic contest. They provide pleasure in a trivial sort of way. Spectacle has little to do with the actual struggle. It is a technical fabrication as are stage backdrops. The integrity of the contest as a tragedy remains intact without either music or spectacle, or the trappings of so-called "big time" athletics.

In summary, an athletic tragedy has plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. The plot is very basic. It must be of sufficient length to allow for the development of pleasing action. The plot illustrates a good athlete coming to a state of unhappiness. His unhappiness is precipitated by a failing on his part that appears unavoidable. The plot that has the strongest cathartic effect is one which presents recognition and reversal concurrently near the end of the contest.

The tragedy is an essential element in our universe. It teaches us that for many men, the ultimate achievement is defeat and that the highest level of performance, the most noble effort, may end in defeat. The athlete who is second best symbolizes both excellence and failure.

If the athletic contest has reached its apotheosis in the quantitative realm, the qualitative domain awaits discovery. I have suggested that an understanding of Aristotelian tragedy affords a stylized aesthetic perspective of the athletic contest understood primarily in terms of process rather than outcome. Dramatic tragedy is proffered as a method for understanding the beauty in the process of athletics and for extending our human sympathies to "tragic" athletes. The beauty of the "tragic" athlete is found in his ability to seize a "spiritual" victory from a natural defeat.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chapter 9.
- 2J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934) pp. 47-48.
- 3J. S. Mill, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. I, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 467.
- 4Dewey, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.
- 5*Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 6E. F. Kaelin, "The Well-Played Game: Notes Toward an Aesthetics of Sport," *Quest*, X, May, 1968, pp. 19-20.
- 7Dewey, *Op. Cit.*, p. 98.
- 8*Ibid.*
- 9H. J. Muller, *The Uses of the Past*, (Oxford University Press, Inc., 1952) p. 393.
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